Our field of historical research

43

OUR FIELD OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH.

[ADDRESS OF GOV. ALEX. RAMSEY, PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY, BEFORE ITS ANNUAL MEETING, JAN. 13, 1851.]

Gentlemen : On assuming the chair for the first time since i have been honored with the Presidency of this Society, I seize the opportunity—the earliest that has offered, to express my thanks for the kind preference which has thus been manifested towards me.

It may seem a strange thing, even to some among our own citizens, and still stranger to people, elsewhere, that a *Historical Society* should have been formed in this Territory, less than a year after its organization, when its history was apparently but a few months old, when the wilderness was as it is yet, around us, when the smoke of Indian lodges still intercepted our view of the horizon, when our very name was so new, that men disputed as to its orthography, and formed parties in contesting its literal meaning.

A *Historical* Society in a land of yesterday! Such an announcement would indeed naturally excite at the first glance, incredulity and wonder in the general mind. Well might it be exclaimed, “the country which has *no past* , can have no history;” with force could it be asked, “ *where* are your *records* ?” and if we even had them, it would not be surprising if it were still demanded, “what those records could possibly record?—what negotiations?—what legislation?—what progress in art or intellect could they possibly 44 exhibit?” “Canst thou gather figs from thorns, or grapes from thistles?”

True, pertinent as such queries might seem, yet nevertheless they would be dictated by error—they would be founded in great misapprehension; for Minnesota has a history, and that not altogether an unwritten one, which can unravel many a page of deep, engrossing

interest; which is rich in tales of daring enterprise, of faithful endurances, of high hopes; which is marked by the early travellers' foot-prints, and by the ancient explorer's pencil; which is glowing with the myths and traditions of our aboriginal races, sprinkled over with their battle fields, with the sites of their ancient villages, and with the *wah-kaun* stones of their teeming mythology.

In Europe, nigh two hundred years ago, as in America at this day, Minnesota—I mean that region which is around and about us —was a land rewards which many an eye was turned, and in regard to which fact and fancy wove a wondrous tale of interest and romance. In consequence of this, from the time when Father Pierre Menard , the devoted Jesuit Missionary, was lost in the forest in 1658 while crossing *Kee-wee-nah* Peninsula, and his sad fate conjectured only from his cassock and breviary, long afterwards found preserved as “Medicine” charms amongst the wild Dakotas of our territory, down to the time when Schoolcraft in 1832 traced our giant Mississippi—a giant more wonderful than the hundred-armed Briareus —to its origin in the gushing fountains of Itasca Lake, Minnesota has continued a favorite field of research, the bourn of many a traveler, and the theme of many a traveler's story.

Here Hennepin in 1688, was first to break the silence of these northern wilds with a white man's voice, in giving to the foaming waters of St. Anthony Falls, their baptismal name in honor of his patron Saint. Here was the scene of 45 his captivity among the M'day-wah-kaun-twan Dakotas, and here he experienced the compassion and protection of Wahzee-koo-tay , the great Nahdawessy Chief.

Here too, not very long afterwards, Baron La Hontan , journeyed; and in this territory that romance of geography, his *La Longue Riviere* , (apparently the St. Peters joined to the Missouri) had its location and due western course—the creature of La Hontan's imagination, or rather of truth and fable curiously interwoven and intermingled.

More reliable than either, the gallant Le Sueur , a brave, enterprising and truthful spirit, in 1700 explored the SKY COLORED WATER of the St. Peter's to its Blue Earth tributary, and in the vicinity of his log fort L'Huillier, on the banks of the *Mahnkahto* , first broke the virgin soil of our Territory with the spade and pick-axe, in delving for copper ore, tons of which, or a green earth supposed to be the ore of that metal, he had conveyed to his native France. He it was, also, who appears to have been the first white man or trader, that supplied the “Scioux” and “Aiavvis” (Ioways) with fire arms and other products of civilized labor; and to his truthful and generally accurate Journal, (but recently brought to our knowledge by the indefatigable researches of our esteemed and learned fellow-member, the Rev. Mr. Neill ,) we are likewise indebted for the best statistics we possess of the early history of the Dakota race, which then, fully a century and a half ago, as now, occupied the greater portion of our territory.

Following Le Sueur , after a considerable interval came Captain Jonathan Carver in 1766, and however extravagant we may regard some of his statements, and however discreditable we may deem his efforts to engross millions of acres, including nearly all the inhabited portion of Minnesota, and the very land upon which our town stands, by a pretended deed of gift from the Indians, still we must concede him to have been an adventurer of no mean 46 courage and enterprise, and his narrative a valuable link in the chain of our early annals.

Still later, and within the present century, Cass and Schoolcraft, Nicollet and Fremont, Long and Keating , have visited and explored our land; and Pike , too, the heroic Zebulon Pike , who in 1802, during the “Expedition to the Upper Mississippi,” of which he has presented so admirable a narrative, gave promise of that fortitude, courage and determination, which marked him throughout a glorious career, until his mangled body surrendered up his noble spirit, happy in the triumph of his country's flag, on the plains of Canada.

These are our records—these in part, our historiographers. Their works form stepping stones, across at least that portion of the river of time, which in this region, for about two hundred years, has rolled its tide occasionally within view of the white race. The gaps between, it is not unfitly our duty and the object of this Society to lessen and to close up.

The materials for this purpose are not scarce, though somewhat difficult to embody in a tangible or reliable form. Not a foot of ground that we tread, but has been trod by nations before us. Wild tribes of men have marched their armies over the site of our towns and fields—fierce battles have been fought where ere long, churches may rear their spires—our ploughshares may turn furrows amidst the graves of buried races, and our children play perhaps, where generations of children have played centuries before them. Dakota and Ojibway, Shiann and Ausinabwaun, Winnebago, Ioway, Ozaukie and Musquakie, each in turn or together, dwelt in the land, hunted or warred through it, migrated to and from it. When the first Jesuit Missionary, one hundred and ninety years ago, visited Lake Superior, he found the Chippewas and Sioux engaged in that war, which has continued with but little intermission nearly to the present time. 47 How long before—for how many centuries previous, this contest was waged, we know not—the records are dim, the traditions vague and uncertain. But we do know, that from the St. Croix to the Mille Lacs, the ancient home of the M'day-wah-kauntwaun Sioux, whose rich maple bottoms are a golgotha of hostile bones, through all the midland hunting grounds to Lake Superior, and northwest by wild rice shallows to the fertile lands of Red Lake, (whose waters have so often drank blood from battles on its shores as to have gained the ensanguined cognomen which we mildly translate “Red,”) we can trace the terrible results of this warfare of the Algonquin and Dakota races,—a warfare which in its results completed that general disruption of all the old geographical relations of the various tribes of Minnesota, which the Dakotas, perhaps, were the first to derange, when they located on the Upper Mississippi.

The incidents of this war—the battles, where fought—the victories, where and by whom won—the councils held and alliances formed—the advances, the retreats, and the final

conquests—are among the inquiries which this Society will consider not unworthy of instituting. By comparison of the records—by ascertaining corroborating traditions—we can likewise endeavor to fix the period when the fire-arms and the iron tomahawk, which their fur trade with the French early placed in the hands of the Chippewas, proved too powerful for the flint-headed arrows and wooden war-clubs of the ancient Sioux; and when, in consequence, the M'day-wah-kauntwauns moved down from their villages on Mille Lacs, and the Teetwaun, Yaunktwaun, and Seeseetwaun Council Fires, struck their tents, abandoned their homes upon the Upper Mississippi, and invaded the western buffalo plains where they now reside, sweeping before them the Shians and other tribes who were then in possession of them.

48

A subject for our investigation scarcely less interesting, is the history of that revolted branch of the Dakota family proper, who in their own language are called the *Hoh-hays* , but who are known to us only by their Chippewa name of Assin-abwauns, or Stone Sioux, from their former residence among the rocky ledges among the Lake of the Woods, named by the Jesuits in their maps more than a century and a half ago, Lake of the Assineboins. The causes which led to, and the period at which occurred, the disruption of the brotherhood, which extinguished one of the grand Council Fires of the Dakota race, and allied its elements with the Algonquin enemy against the parent tribe—whether it originated, as has been said, in a second Helen and a second Paris , like the guilty pair whose guilty flight lighted the torch of discord among the Pelasgian tribes of Greece, and led to the destruction of Troy—or whether other reasons operated to produce the fratricidal contest—it might be well to determine,—as well as the time at which they too migrated westward, but in a more northern line, towards the White Earth and Yellow Stone tributaries of the Missouri.

Nor would it be foreign to the object of this association, to question into the degree of credit to be attached to the M'day-wah-kauntwaun tradition, which assigns to the Ioways, the former possession of the St. Peters river country, to its mouth, where they were found

by the Dakotas and driven southwest; and to what extent this tradition is confirmed by the probable fact, that in 1700, when Le Sueur visited the Mahnkahtoh, the Ioways yet held the lands in this Territory about the head waters of the Des Moines, from which, subsequently to his time, we know they must have been further driven by the Sioux, low down on that river; and whether, also, this last retrogression was not immediately occasioned 49 by that western invasion of the Dakotas of the Upper Mississippi, which has already been alluded to.

Another inquiry which suggests itself, pregnant with equal interest, is as to the probability, or otherwise, that this expulsion of the Ioways from the St. Peters, caused the separation off from them into distinct bands or tribes, of the Otoes, Omahas, and Winnebagoes, who are unquestionably of the same origin with the Ioways, and that too not very remotely—if, as I understand, they all speak one language, with slight differences of pronunciation, the result of isolation, but which differences do not prevent their readily comprehending each other—and in this connection, likewise, we may with propriety discuss the probability of the conjecture that the Winnebagoes, at the separation, were but a band of a few families of Ioways, who, escaping from the Dakota invasion, eastward instead of southwest, settled at the head of Green Bay, where, near two hundred years since, their village—still a small one—was found by Marquette , who designates in his map the bay, as the *Baye des Puans* and the village as that of the *Puans* .

Here, surrounded by Algonquin tribes, the hereditary enemies of their enemy, they were safe from molestation by the Upper Dakotas; and in the progress of time, the Hohtchungh-grahs, (as they call themselves,) growing strong with continued peace, and increasing gradually in numbers, spread themselves without opposition, over a considerable extent of country to the southward, presenting finally to the eyes of men of science, that anomaly which has puzzled even the historian Bancroft to account for—an outlier of the great Pawnee Dakota group of tribes, situated far towards the east, and entirely amongst the

Algonquin family of tribes, with whose cognate languages, their's has not the slightest affinity.

Dwelling thus upon the origin of tribes, it may not be out 3 50 of place to refer to the prevalent opinion among men who have investigated the subject, that the Chippewas who are spread over the northern portion of this Territory and Wisconsin, are emigrants from the East since the discovery of America; and that the Sioux who in ancient times occupied the exact position that the former do now, first knew these indomitable enemies as did the earliest white men who visited them, as dwellers at the Falls of St. Mary of Lake Superior. As *Hrah-hrah-twauns* , or people of the Falls, is the Dakota proper name for them, just as *Saulteurs* , having the same signification, is that bestowed upon them by the French, the opinion that they came from the East or North, crossing from the Canada side by the Falls, is not without plausibility to sustain it.

Gentlemen: I have thrown out these hints, embodying speculations and theories to be sure, but speculations nevertheless that are not uninteresting, which may stimulate to research, and I hope eliminate some facts from the chaotic oblivion in which our aboriginal history is covered up. But while attending to these, I would not that we should forget the more tangible objects for which we are associated. A library that shall embrace works upon American history, in all its branches; that shall gather upon its shelves, the narratives of early and later travellers to this and other portions of the great West; that shall be rich in archæology and ethnology; that in books upon the science of languages, and in vocabularies of our aboriginal dialects, shall present an inviting field for the student in comparative philology—such a library we should endeavor to collect and preserve. Nor must we rest content with availing ourselves of the labor of others. There is much for each of us individually to do. A great deal that is worth preserving is yet unwritten. While the Indians are within our reach, we should hasten to record their traditions, to describe their manners and customs, their 51 religious rites, their domestic observances, their peculiarities in peace and war; we should seize the opportunity as well to sketch some of the beautiful, and often most elaborately constructed legends, which like that concerning

the huge man-fish which spanned the mouth of the St. Croix and dammed its waters, or that of *Mannebosho* , the Thunderer of Lake Superior, invest with a spiritual interest nearly every lake and river, and prominent landmark of the country.

In tracing the origin of the Indian races around us, we should not overlook the necessity of preserving their languages, as most important guides in this interesting, though perhaps unavailing pursuit. It must be evident to all, that they are destined to pass away with the tribes who speak them, unless by vocabularies we promptly arrest their extinction. The Dakota language proper—thanks to the arduous labors of the Messrs. Pond, Riggs , and Williamson , the devoted missionaries among them, is in no danger of being lost!—an elaborate dictionary of fifteen thousand words and a grammar, attest the extent of their labors, and are evidences that any work by members of this association in that direction would be superfluous. But there are other tribes whose dialects will continue to remain, in a great measure; unwritten ones, if some among us do not voluntarily assume the task of lexicographers, as I trust some will.

While thus endeavoring to secure the fleeting memorials of the *red* nations who have played their parts on this division of the world's great stage, it should not escape our recollection, that the white pioneers of the North-West, who for many a year have toiled and struggled with the difficulties of the wilderness,—men of intelligence and energy and fortitude —have likewise tales to tell which are not unimportant links in our annals. We cordially invite these to contribute their quota to our local history, and shall be equally obliged to them or to others for contributions to our museum, in which 52 we design collecting samples of the domestic manufactures, utensils, arms, dress and relics, peculiar to the old inhabitants of the land.

In conclusion, permit me to say to this audience, while thanking them for their attention, that institutions like ours, elevate the character of our young Territory in the eyes of friends abroad, and in the estimation of men of character and science, more than would the golden sands of California, if we possessed them. Let us not forfeit their good opinion by

either becoming discouraged in the path we have marked out, or neglecting to do all in our power to *work* out the plan under which we are associated.

Each member should consider it his duty to contribute something to the common stock, and not rest content with permitting or asking a few only to sustain the institution by their labors. History is said to be philosophy teaching by example; and if this be so, historical societies may be characterized as the retorts in which the elements of that philosophy are collected and combined. We should be careful then, not to allow our retort to explode from want of attention, nor to collapse for want of aliment, lest our future should derive no instruction from philosophical deductions on the events of our not uninteresting, though somewhat mythical and traditional past.